Navajo Language

By Yuval Keinan
Background

- Native American tribe of the southwestern US
- Population: 300,048 (2011)
- Native speakers: 169,359
- Monolinguals: 7,600
- Called Diné bizaad
- Most spoken native American language in north America
Navajo in WWII

- During the war the US drafted native speakers to transmit top-secret military messages over telephone and radio.
- Chosen because grammar differs strongly from German & Japanese. No dictionaries existed at the time.
- **Navajo code**
Vowels & Tones

- Has four vowels a, e, i and o.
- Each exists in both oral and nasalized forms.
- Can be either short or long.
- Distinguishes for tone between high and low.
Grammar

- Word order is SOV but has a “noun ranking”
- A "verb-heavy" language
- Few nouns
- No adjectives
- Verbs contain more morphemes than do nouns
Verbs

The key element in Navajo is the verb

The prefixes are affixed to the verb in a specified order

Prefixes give information such as:

- Postposition
- Iterativity
- Number
- Subject/Object
- adverb-state
- mode and aspect
- Classifier
Verbs

Every verb must have at least one prefix.

Despite the potential for extreme verb complexity, only the mode/aspect, subject, classifier, and stem are absolutely necessary.

Negation: by framing the verb with doo and da

mósi doo nitsaa da – "the cat is not big"

Dooda, as a single word signifies "no".
Two types of nouns:

- Simple nouns
- Nouns derived from verbs

One estimate counted 6,245 nouns with most of these them being derived from verbs.
Nouns

Simple nouns: distinguished by their ability to be inflected with a possessive prefix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun stem</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Possessed Noun stem</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Morpheme composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>béésh</td>
<td>&quot;knife&quot;</td>
<td>bibéézh</td>
<td>&quot;her knife&quot;</td>
<td>bi- (3rd person) + béézh &quot;knife&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>héél</td>
<td>&quot;pack&quot;</td>
<td>shiyéél</td>
<td>&quot;my pack&quot;</td>
<td>shi- (1st person singular) + yéél &quot;pack&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nouns

Nouns derived from verbs:

Clock - ná’oolkilí: it is moved slowly in a circle.

Singer - hataałii: he sings

Phoenix, Arizona - hoozdo: "place/space is hot"
Can potentially be long and complex, such as:

- Tank:
  
  chidí naa’na’í bee’eldqohtsoh bikáá’ dah naaznilígíí
  
  vehicle that crawls around, by means of which big explosions are made, and that one sits on at an elevation.

- Computer:
  
  béésh bee ak’e’elchíhi t’áá bí nitsékeesígíí
  
  Metal that with it one writes and it thinks on its own.
Considered SOV but actually the order of nouns is determined by animacy hierarchy.

Animacy

- Considered SOV but actually the order of nouns is determined by animacy hierarchy.

- Human, lightning
- Babies, Big animals
- Mid size animals
- Small animals
- Insects, Plants, Inanimate objects
- Natural forces
- Abstraction

Animacy hierarchy:

- Human
- Lightning
- Babies
- Big animals
- Mid size animals
- Small animals
- Insects
- Plants
- Inanimate objects
- Natural forces
- Abstraction
Mósi tazhii yinoołchéél.
Cat turkey yi-chasing
'The cat is chasing the turkey.'

Tazchii mósi binoołchéélł.
Turkey cat bi-chasing
'The turkey is being chased by the cat.'

*Tsídii at’ée’d yishtąsh
bird girl yi-pecked
*'The bird pecked the girl.'

At’ée’d tsídi bishtąsh
Girl bird bi-pecked
'The girl was pecked by the bird.'
In 2013 the movie STAR WARS was translated to Navajo:
References

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animacy#Navajo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animacy#Navajo)
- **Language in the USA:** Themes for the Twenty-first Century
- **Pronouns, Presuppositions, and Hierarchies:** The Work of Eloise Jelinek in Context